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SUBJECT: SUDANESE REBELS CALL THE SHOTS IN CHADIAN TOWN OF
BAHAI

REF: NDJAMENA 1215

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The northeastern Chadian town of Bahai was revealed to be a JEM-controlled stronghold following the clash between the National Redemption Front (NRF) and Sudanese Government forces October 7-8. Following that battle, numerous Sudanese soldiers remain in Chadian custody and the Government of Chad claims that its interest in the matter is purely "humanitarian." Observers have commented on what appears to be a close relationship between Chadian military and civil authorities and JEM commanders in Bahai and Iriba. JEM troops were reported to be moving south, possibly to reinforce GOC forces against possible Chadian rebel forays. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Reftel reported on the October 7-8 clash between the NRF and the Government of Sudan forces (SAF) in Kariari, near the northeastern town of Bahai. Based on subsequent conversations with international relief workers who were either in Bahai during the clash or had staff members in the region, it appears that the warring parties remained on the Sudanese side of the border, and did not enter Chadian territory. The refugee camps in the Bahai region were not affected directly by the fighting, but camp members were aware of the clashes and a number of them left the camps to observe the fighting from a nearby wadi (seasonal watercourse). It is clear, however, that the aftermath of the fight was very much in Chadian territory with numerous Sudanese soldiers either deserting into Chad or being taken there by JEM forces.

¶3. (SBU) All reports point to a striking absence of Chadian local authorities in Bahai and agree that the JEM was effectively in control before and after the battle. International Rescue Committee Chad Director informed EmbOffs that neither the Prefet nor the Gendarme commander were in Bahai during the October 7-8 clash. The Sous-Prefet was in town, but appeared to be collaborating with the JEM commanders (he in fact warned the IRC shortly before the battle began that there would be a clash). The IRC Director was in direct contact with JEM commanders who brought JEM and Sudanese army soldiers into the IRC-assisted hospital in Bahai for treatment following the clash. (According to the International Federation of the Red Cross there were 88 wounded in Bahai -- a mix of JEM and Sudanese soldiers). JEM commanders were described as respectful to humanitarian workers. The IRC Director informed EmbOffs that a Chadian army battalion arrived in Bahai some three days after the clash, following a forced march from the town of Fada. His

impression was that there was quite a cooperative relationship between the arriving Chadian army and the JEM soldiers. However, in the ensuing days, the JEM presence diminished, and it was believed that JEM soldiers were heading south.

14. (SBU) On October 9, PolOff visited approximately 60 SAF members housed in the Iriba prison who had been handed over to the Chadian authorities by the JEM/National Redemption Front. According to their Commander (a member of the 310th squadron), up to 500 SAF forces may have been killed in the fighting October 7-8 in Bahai. The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) representative informed Emboff that, as of October 11, there were 87 Sudanese soldiers in Iriba, of which 19 were wounded. The IFRC representative described the situation in Iriba as a "breakdown in the chain of command" with JEM soldiers fully integrated into the Chadian army. IFRC was prepared to take the Sudanese soldiers home, but did not want to simply escort them to the Sudanese side of the border -- a flight to Khartoum would be preferable. In the meantime, their status was not well defined. Possibly they were deserters, possibly they had been taken by the JEM by force.

15. (SBU) At the same time, the Chadian Newspaper "Le Progress" (aligned with the Government) reported that 103 Sudanese soldiers, including three officers, had crossed the border "seeking refuge" on the Chadian side of the border. According to a Chadian Government communique, the clash between Sudanese rebels and the Government of Sudan was of no concern to Chad; while it was studying (in conjunction with the Government of Sudan) the question of the repatriation of the Sudanese forces, Chad's involvement in the matter was purely humanitarian in nature.

COMMENT

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16. (SBU) The JEM control of Bahai calls into question the GOC's ability and/or desire to exert its civil and military authority over the border region. With the approach of the dry season, President Deby may find it in his interest to have the JEM providing a buffer zone between the interior and Chadian rebels at the frontier.
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